

Phil 2, March 15, 2011

Ayer's expressivism

Ayer's view, as you read, is that statements of value "are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false" (103). Suppose that Ayer had said to Tyson:

"Violence is a bad thing. People ought to talk over their differences."

According to *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer would have meant something like:

"Violence: bloody hell! People talking over their differences: jolly good!"

In this case, what Ayer said would have been neither true, nor false. It would not have attempted to say anything about the world. It would have just been a kind of venting of Ayer's feelings.

Analogy: If Naomi Campbell had said, "Thank you, A. J.!" it would have been bizarre for Ayer, or anyone else, to reply: "That's true!" or "That's false!" Why? Because Campbell would have simply been expressing an emotion, namely, gratitude. And such expressions are neither true, nor false. In saying, "Thank you!" we are not attempting to describe how things are, in a way that might succeed in matching, or fail to match, reality.

Expressions v. reports

- It is important to distinguish *expressing* an emotion from *reporting that* one has that emotion.
- Ayer is not saying, "I feel negative emotions toward violence," although he is expressing those negative feelings.
- If Ayer were saying, "I feel negative emotions toward violence," then what he would be saying *could be* true or false.

Motivations for Ayer's expressivism

1. *Value statements are neither analytic, nor empirically verifiable:* Ayer was one of the proponents of a school of philosophy called "Logical Positivism," which reached its apogee in the first half of the last century. Logical positivists claimed that in order to be meaningful, a statement had to be either "analytic"—that is, true or false by definition—or empirically verifiable or falsifiable. Value statements were neither analytic, nor empirically verifiable or falsifiable. That is why Ayer holds that "they are not in the literal sense significant" (103).
2. *Value statements cannot be reduced to descriptive, value-free statements:* "[S]ince it is not self-contradictory to say that some pleasant things are not good, or that some bad things are desired, it cannot be the case that the sentence 'x is good' is equivalent to 'x is pleasant,' or 'x is desired'" (105).
3. *Value statements are tied to motivation:* Value judgment seems to entail motivation. If one sincerely makes some value judgment, then one must be motivated accordingly. How does expressivism support this assumption? If one sincerely says, "X is good," then one sincerely expresses a positive emotion toward X. If one *sincerely* expresses a positive emotion toward X, then one *has* a positive emotion toward X. If one has a positive emotion toward X, then one *is* motivated to bring about X.

Is expressivism a skeptical position?

On the one hand:

- There are no value properties: no goodness or badness. (Just like there is no “Hello!-ness.”)
- Value statements cannot be ultimately justified.

On the other hand:

- There is no reason for us to retract, or cease to make, value statements.

Is this the correct account of the meaning of value-statements?

First problem: How is disagreement possible?

Ayer: “Men ought to talk things over, rather than settle things with fists.”

Tyson: “Not so: Men ought to settle things with fists, not talk things over.”

Tyson seems to *contradict* Ayer. But, according to Ayer:

Ayer: “Talking things over: hip-hip-hoorah!”

Tyson: “Talking things over: #@%\$! that!”

But does Tyson then contradict Ayer?

First reply: Apparent disagreement about values is in fact disagreement about value-free facts.

Second reply: There can be disagreement without contradiction. (Ayer suggests this in the Introduction to the Second Edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*.) Value statements are *attempts to get people to act in certain ways*—commands, proposals, imperatives—rather than mere expressions of feeling. We might interpret Ayer as saying:

“Let men, including you and me, talk things over, rather than settle things with fists.”

Then we heard Tyson reply:

“No: Let men, including you and me, settle things with fists, not talk things over.”

Tyson may not be *contradicting* Ayer. Again, Ayer is not *asserting* anything about how things are. So these do not proposals “disagree” in the sense that only one can be true (since neither is capable of truth or falsity).

Nevertheless, Tyson is, in some sense, *ruling out* what Ayer is proposing. His proposal is incompatible with Ayer’s, in the sense that the proposals cannot *both* be carried out or pursued. It’s either one or the other.

Second problem: What do value-terms mean in other contexts?

If doing a thing *is bad*, getting your little brother to do it *is bad*.

Tormenting the cat *is bad*.

Therefore, getting your little brother to torment the cat *is bad*.

According to Ayer:

If *boo* doing a thing, *boo* getting your little brother to do it!
Boo tormenting the cat!
Therefore, *boo* getting your little brother to torment the cat!

But what does it mean to say: “If boo doing a thing”?

The basic problem:

- Most words can be used in a variety of different contexts to do a variety of different things. Consider:
 - (1) “Jenny is going to class.”
 - (2) “Is Jenny going to class?”
 - (3) “Jenny, go to class!”
- The meanings of the words—“Jenny,” “go,” “class”—stay the same. But the uses are different. In (1), the speaker is *asserting*, in (2) the speaker is *asking*, and in (3) the speaker is *commanding*.
- Therefore, the meaning of a word is *not* limited to *only one of those uses*.
- However, according to Ayer, the meaning of “bad” is limited to only one use: namely, *expressing a negative feeling*.
- This is why Ayer cannot make sense of the phrase: “*If* doing a thing is bad...” Someone who says this is not expressing a negative feeling toward doing a thing.
- There are other cases in which “bad” doesn’t express a negative feeling:
 1. With other logical connectives: “*Either* a thing is bad, or...”
 2. With certain psychological verbs: “I *wonder whether* tormenting cats is bad,” “I *hope* that tormenting cats is bad.”
 3. In questions: “*Is* tormenting cats bad?”

In these cases too, Ayer’s analysis leads to seeming gibberish. (Note that these problematic cases are all ones in which we would say, pre-philosophically, that “bad” is not being used to assert anything.)

Review Questions:

1. Explain the difference between *expressing* an attitude and *reporting* an attitude, using “ouch,” “hello,” “thanks,” or, even better, an example of your own.
2. Suppose one person says, “Legalizing drugs is good,” while another says, “No, legalizing drugs is bad!” According to Ayer’s analysis, can they be disagreeing? How so?
3. Why can’t Ayer reply to the second problem by saying that “bad” has one meaning in the sentence, “Tormenting the cat is bad,” but another meaning in the phrase, “If a thing is bad, then...”?